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Congress would like to know

What does the CIA do?

By Jack McWethy
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Since Congress created the ultra-secret Central Intelligence Agency in 1947, a growing number of members have been itching to find out more about what their creation does.

The push is on again this year, with impetus being provided by disclosures that the United States is involved in a clandestine war in Laos that Congress didn't know about.

More than a dozen bills have been introduced this spring and summer aimed at removing some of the legal blinders Congress put on itself with respect to the CIA. Some would allow the legislative branch to share more fully in the agency's intelligence information.

In the last two decades, nearly 100 bills have been introduced aimed at easing the tension between an uninformed Congress and an uninformative CIA. Not one bill has passed and only two have been put to a vote. As a result, the CIA remains a mystery even to the body that voted it into existence.

The agency is so secret that some members of Congress who are supposed to know about CIA activities — members of the four highly select intelligence oversight subcommittees — did not know how deeply the CIA figures in the continued existence of the Royal Lao government. CIA oversight is supposed to be conducted by subcommittees of the Senate and House Armed Services and Appropriations Committees.

Much to the irritation of some members, the CIA oversight subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee not only keeps its business with the agency a secret, but also keeps the subcommittee's membership a secret from other members of Congress.

Explanation of Secrecy

Paul Wilson, staff director of the House committee, told Congressional Quarterly the membership was a secret "because that's always been."

Missouri Democrat Stuart Symington, a member of the Senate Armed Services CIA oversight subcommittee and chairman of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on U.S. commitments abroad, had to send two staff members to the jungles of Laos to find out how extensive the CIA program was in that supposedly neutral country.

"In all my committees there is no real knowledge of what is going on in Laos," Symington told a closed session of the Senate June 7.

Nine senators, including Symington, sit on one of the two Senate subcommittees designed to provide legislative oversight of the CIA.

"The law does not legally require any review by Congress," said T. Edward Braswell, chief counsel for the

Senate Armed Services Committee.

Despite Symington's claims to the contrary, Braswell told Congressional Quarterly: "The budget is gone into more thoroughly than people (on the committee) would admit. It's just reviewed in a different way than, say, the State Department's budget is."

Braswell said the budget review was at times conducted by a "very select group . . . more select than the five-man subcommittee."

Ceria Blanche Authority Although the CIA was established in 1947, it was not for another two years that Congress granted the agency carte blanche to operate without normal legislative oversight.

The 1959 law exempted the CIA from all federal statutes

regarding "functions, names, official titles, salaries or numbers of personnel" employed by the agency. To the CIA director, the law granted the authority to spend money "without regard to the provisions of law and regulations relating to the expenditure of government funds."

The Senate Appropriations Committee has a five-man subcommittee with the primary responsibility of reviewing the CIA budget, a figure which later is hidden in the accounts of other government agencies.

According to William W. Woodruff, the one-man staff of the Appropriations oversight subcommittee, the senators discuss more than just the CIA when its director, Richard Helms, testifies.

"We look to the CIA for the best intelligence on the Defense Department budget that you can get," Woodruff said. He said Helms also provided the subcommittee with budget estimates for all government intelligence operations, including those not specifically under the jurisdiction of the CIA.

While the House Appropriations Committee veils its oversight operation in secrecy, the House Armed Services Committee just formed a new subcommittee to deal with all aspects of intelligence.

For the last seven months Rep. F. Edward Hebert, D-La., chairman of Armed Services, used the full committee to weight CIA testimony.

"To say the committee was performing any real oversight function was a fiction," said freshman committee member Michael Harrington, a Massachusetts Democrat. The new subcommittee will be under the direction of Rep. Lucien N. Nedzi, D-Mich.

No Quelling Society

"I find it very difficult to believe the oversight committees could not obtain some pretty accurate information on how much of that CIA money was going into Laos," commented Sen. Jack Miller, R-Iowa, during the Senate's June 7 closed session.

Sen. J. W. Fulbright D Ark., chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, retorted: "It has been said that we all know

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